


The
Amazing
Flight of
Darius
Frobisher

by Bill Harley



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*For the Kidney family—
Dave, Kim, Jenna, and Will, who read it first*

Thanks to Jane Murphy who helped bring Darius back to life,
and whose questions made me rethink the whole story.

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who immediately liked what he read. Thanks to the Library itself
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We meet Darius 1

All stories begin somewhere, and this one begins with a large red water balloon sailing through the air toward a black car as it pulled into a driveway.

“Uh, oh,” said Darius.

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Miss Hastings, “I didn’t see them coming at all.”

“Neither did I,” said Darius.

The moment he finished his sentence, the water balloon exploded on the front windshield of the car. The tires screeched and the car lurched to a halt. Darius and Miss Hastings watched with some concern from their perch on the roof of the house. They had been shooting water balloons out into the street with a giant slingshot made of rubber tubing. It was Miss Hastings’s idea.

Of course, that isn’t exactly normal behavior for a housekeeper. But Miss Hastings was trying to cheer Darius up. When you are only eleven years old and your father has disappeared in a hot air balloon, your housekeeper is likely to try anything to lift your spirits.

Especially if she loves you.

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Darius peered down at the car. The doors flew open, and two men and a woman hopped out. They were dressed in sleek black, like the car, and they staggered a little as if the water balloon had hit them and not the car.

“You stay here,” whispered Darius. “I’ll go see who it is.”

“I had better come down, too,” said Miss Hastings. “They look important.”

Darius scrambled back through the third-floor window of the old house and headed to the stairs as Miss Hastings did her best to keep up. Darius scampered downstairs and opened the front door. The woman and two men standing before him still seemed slightly shaken, and their faces looked stern and serious.

Darius had never seen these people before. Since his father had vanished, there had been a lot of adults around him that he didn’t know, clucking their tongues and shaking their heads and looking at him with sad eyes. They gave him the creeps. But these three were the worst yet. They reminded Darius of the three gloomy ravens in a song that Miss Hastings often sang to him at bedtime.

But he didn’t say this. Instead he was polite and asked, “May I help you?”

“Someone...hit our car...with a water balloon,” sputtered the woman, sucking in air as if her breath were trying to get away from her.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” said Darius. He decided not to volunteer any more information than necessary. “Are you all right?”

None of them answered. They were busy gasping. After a moment, one of the men caught his breath and said, “Ahem. My name is Figby.”

“Yes, ahem,” said the second man. He, like the first one, was

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carrying a shiny black briefcase that matched his suit. “My name is Migby.”

“You poor dear,” said the woman to Darius. “My name is Katrina Zarnoff. You may call me Aunt Kitty.” She reached out and stroked the side of Darius’s face. Then without asking, she whisked by him into the house with Figby and Migby close at her heels. They nearly ran over Miss Hastings in the entryway.

“Please, do come in,” said Darius. “Since you already have.”

Darius thought this was the kind of thing his father might have said to people who entered your house without asking. His father hated pompous people. Darius felt a sharp pang in his heart.

There was something about Darius’s father that made him different from other people—and *very* unlike Figby, Migby, and Katrina Zarnoff. (You may call her Aunt Kitty if you like, but Darius isn’t going to and neither am I.) Rudy Frobisher was quick to smile and he smiled with his whole face, especially his eyes, which were a very bright blue, like the sky on a clear fall afternoon. This magical smile could raise your spirits even on the dreariest of days. Darius’s father lived life boldly, too, which is not something you would expect from an insurance salesman. On the days he wasn’t selling insurance to make a living, he went on the most marvelous adventures.

Rudy Frobisher had sailed to Antarctica and stayed with a family of penguins. He had trekked across the steppes of Mongolia and lived on yak’s milk. Once, Darius’s father had even missed a week of work because he was trapped in a cave filled with thousands of bats and one grizzly bear the size of a mastodon.

Most people thought that Darius’s father was crazy, especially

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when he told them about talking with penguins. But Darius loved hearing every exciting detail of his father's travels. In fact, he loved everything about his dad, even his limp. It was only a small limp, but it caused Mr. Frobisher to pitch slightly to one side as he walked, making his footsteps sound like hiccups. It gave Darius a thrill every time he heard his dad come in the front door. At each uneven step the coins in his dad's pants pocket clinked against his leg, *ching...ching...ching*.

Darius missed his father terribly during his absences, but he knew that his father's travels were part of who he was, like his smile and his limp. In some ways, Mr. Frobisher's time away from Darius and Miss Hastings made him an even better father when he was home. He always came back with the most amazing stories and gifts, and he promised Darius that when he was old enough, he would take him along on an adventure. Even Miss Hastings, who would rather sit on a porcupine than go on an adventure herself, said that Mr. Frobisher always came home relaxed and refreshed.

And he always had come home on schedule, until a few weeks ago. One fine Saturday morning, Darius's father had climbed into a hot air balloon for a weekend jaunt. But he disappeared, as it were, into thin air. The last time anyone saw him, he had been soaring over Newfoundland, headed toward the North Atlantic Ocean on the wings of a great storm. No one knew what happened to him. Not even I know, and I am telling you this story.

And so, the chances seemed high that Darius would never hear the comforting *ching ching ching* of his father's walk again. That prospect was precisely what Figby, Migby, and Zarnoff had come to discuss.

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The three visitors sat down on the couch in the living room and opened their briefcases and their mouths. They spoke to Miss Hastings and Darius in a tone of voice that I am sure you have heard before—and that I am sure you hate. It was a tone of voice that said, *We know everything and you are idiots.*

“Ahem,” said Figby, “we are the legal and accounting firm of Figby, Migby, and Zarnoff, and we represent the estate of Rudy Frobisher.”

“Ahem,” said Migby, “we have examined his records and discovered one big mess.”

“I’m not surprised,” said Miss Hastings. “Mr. Frobisher is much too busy to keep things very neat.”

“It’s unfortunate he was so irresponsible,” said Katrina Zarnoff, looking at Darius with big sad eyes that made him want to poke her in the nose.

“At least he’s nice,” said Darius.

“Was nice,” said Figby.

“We are speaking in the past tense, unfortunately,” said Migby. “Your father *was*, not is.”

“I think he’s still alive,” said Darius.

“Not likely,” said Katrina Zarnoff.

“But it’s possible,” insisted Darius.

“And pigs can fly,” muttered Figby.

“Actually,” said Darius, “my father once told me about a kind of pig he saw on a small island in the South Pacific. They live in trees and swing on vines, which is almost like flying.”

Figby, Migby, and Zarnoff looked at Darius like he had three heads. They obviously thought he was as crazy as his father.

“Ahem.” Figby cleared his throat and continued, “Unfortunately, although Mr. Frobisher sold insurance, he had

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none for himself. He took far too many risks for anyone to insure him.”

“Ahem. And we have determined that the best thing to do is to sell the house and establish a trust for the young man,” said Migby, ignoring both Darius and the housekeeper.

“We will distribute a modest amount of money to you, Miss Hastings, in recognition of your years of service,” said Figby.

“And you, poor Darius,” said Katrina Zarnoff, “what will we do with you?”

Suddenly the smell of something burning filled the room.

Katrina Zarnoff sniffed the air. “Is your house on fire?” she asked.

“Oh dear!” exclaimed Miss Hastings. “I forgot about the toast. I thought you might like some.”

“I’ll get it,” said Darius. He got up and ran into the kitchen. Miss Hastings had been burning toast for years. While some people won’t eat burnt toast, Darius had gotten used to the flavor and now quite liked it. He liked it even better because Miss Hastings made it for him.

He put the toast on a plate, cut it into neat triangles, and brought it into the living room. The three guests gave each other knowing looks, and then Katrina Zarnoff wrote something down on a notepad.

“No, thank you,” they sniffed when Darius offered them some toast.

“It’s really good,” said Darius, taking a big bite. “I like it this way.”

“As I was saying,” said Katrina Zarnoff, “what will we do with you, little Darius?”

“You could leave me and Miss Hastings alone, and we could figure out what to do ourselves,” Darius suggested.

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The three visitors looked at the burnt toast on the table.

“Impossible,” said Figby.

“Impracticable,” said Migby.

“Out of the question!” proclaimed Katrina Zarnoff.

“Ahem,” said Figby. “We have made arrangements for you to stay with the one relative you have left.”

“Ahem,” added Migby. “And you will be leaving tomorrow morning.”

“You lucky boy,” said Katrina Zarnoff, “You are going to live with your sweet Aunt Inga.”

“Not that!” Darius nearly choked on his toast. “Anything but that! Anyone but Aunt Inga!”

“You’re upset now,” said the woman, “but time will heal your wounds.”

“What about Miss Hastings?” said Darius, glancing over at his ancient caretaker. She had a very sad look on her face. “She needs me!”

“Don’t be silly,” said Figby. “She’s a grown-up.”

“She can take care of herself,” said Migby.

“She burns the toast,” said Darius.

“Then she shouldn’t be raising you,” said Katrina Zarnoff. “That’s why we’re sending you to your Aunt Inga. Tomorrow we will come for you. Pack a few things to take with you, but not too many. Your dear Aunt Inga doesn’t have very much room in her house. She is making a sacrifice to take you in because she loves you.” Katrina Zarnoff tried to pat Darius on the head. He leaned away from her to avoid her bony fingers.

“Aunt Inga doesn’t even like me!” Darius protested.

But Figby, Migby, and Katrina Zarnoff were not listening. They snapped their briefcases shut and rose from their seats like a flock of scavengers, then flapped toward the door.

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“We’ll be back for you tomorrow,” Figby squawked.

“Tomorrow morning,” Migby added.

“Good-bye, Darius,” said Katrina Zarnoff with a snooty smile.

“And remember, this is for your own good.” She then marched out of the house, Migby and Figby trailing in her wake.

“I told you,” Darius called after them, “Aunt Inga doesn’t even like me!” When he heard the door slam, he turned to Miss Hastings, who was now sitting on the couch.

There were tears running down her cheeks. “I am so sorry, Darius,” she said.

“We can’t let this happen!” said Darius.

But if there are two groups of people to whom unpleasant things happen despite their best efforts, it is children and old people. And as much as I would like it to be otherwise, Darius and Miss Hastings had more unpleasant things ahead.